Secrets to Success:
Lessons from the Cup of Excellence®

Results of a study by the
Specialty Coffee Association of Nicaragua and TechnoServe

November 2003

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INTRODUCTION

The Cup of Excellence® is a competition whose objective is to identify and reward the best coffees produced in a given country. During the competition, a jury of national and international "cuppers" or tasters follow a rigorous process to select the best coffees. Afterwards, the winning coffees are sold through an international Internet auction. In Nicaragua, the Cup of Excellence® has been held twice to date.

In Nicaragua, the Cup of Excellence® has captured the interest of many coffee producers. Many producers are asking what conditions they need and what they need to do on their farms in order to produce a coffee of excellent quality.

In order to answer these questions, the Specialty Coffee Association of Nicaragua (ACEN) and TechnoServe carried out a study in August, September, and October of 2003. The goal of the study was to determine the key factors that have contributed to the success of the winners of the Cup of Excellence® 2003.

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INTRODUCTION

The study consisted of two components:

- A comparison of the agro-climatic conditions of Nicaragua's total coffee production with the 385 participants and the 37 winners of the Cup of Excellence® 2003
- A comparison of the agricultural production practices and the wet processing practices of a sample of 20 non-winners with a sample of 20 winners of the Cup of Excellence® 2003.

This document presents the results of this study. Although we recognize that the results are based on a small sample of producers, we hope that this study will contribute to a better understanding of how to produce a coffee of excellent quality.

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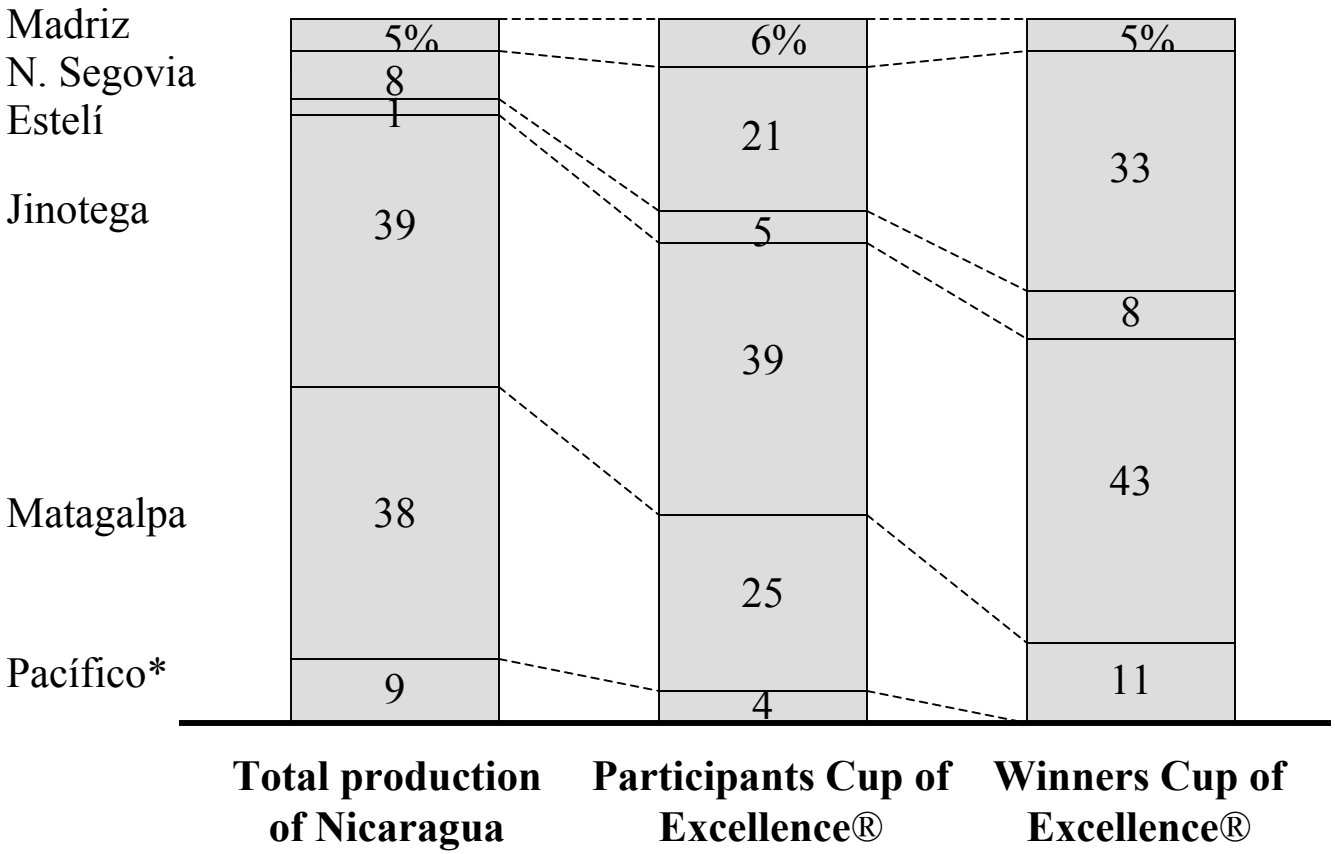
Most of the winners of the Cup of Excellence® 2003 are from the departments of Jinotega and Nueva Segovia



* Managua, Carazo, Masaya, Granada, Rivas, León, Chinandega y Boaco

Source: UNICAFE; TechnoServe

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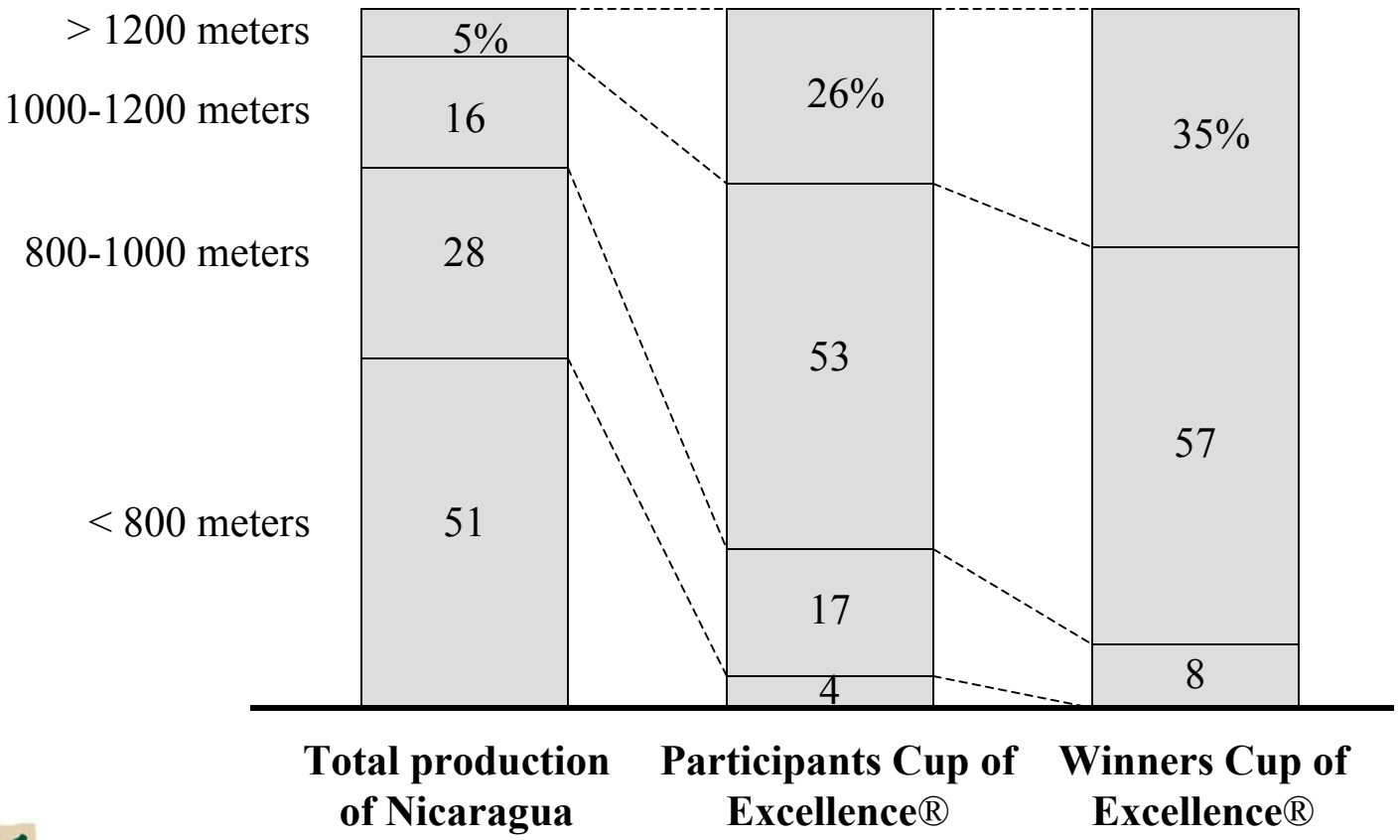
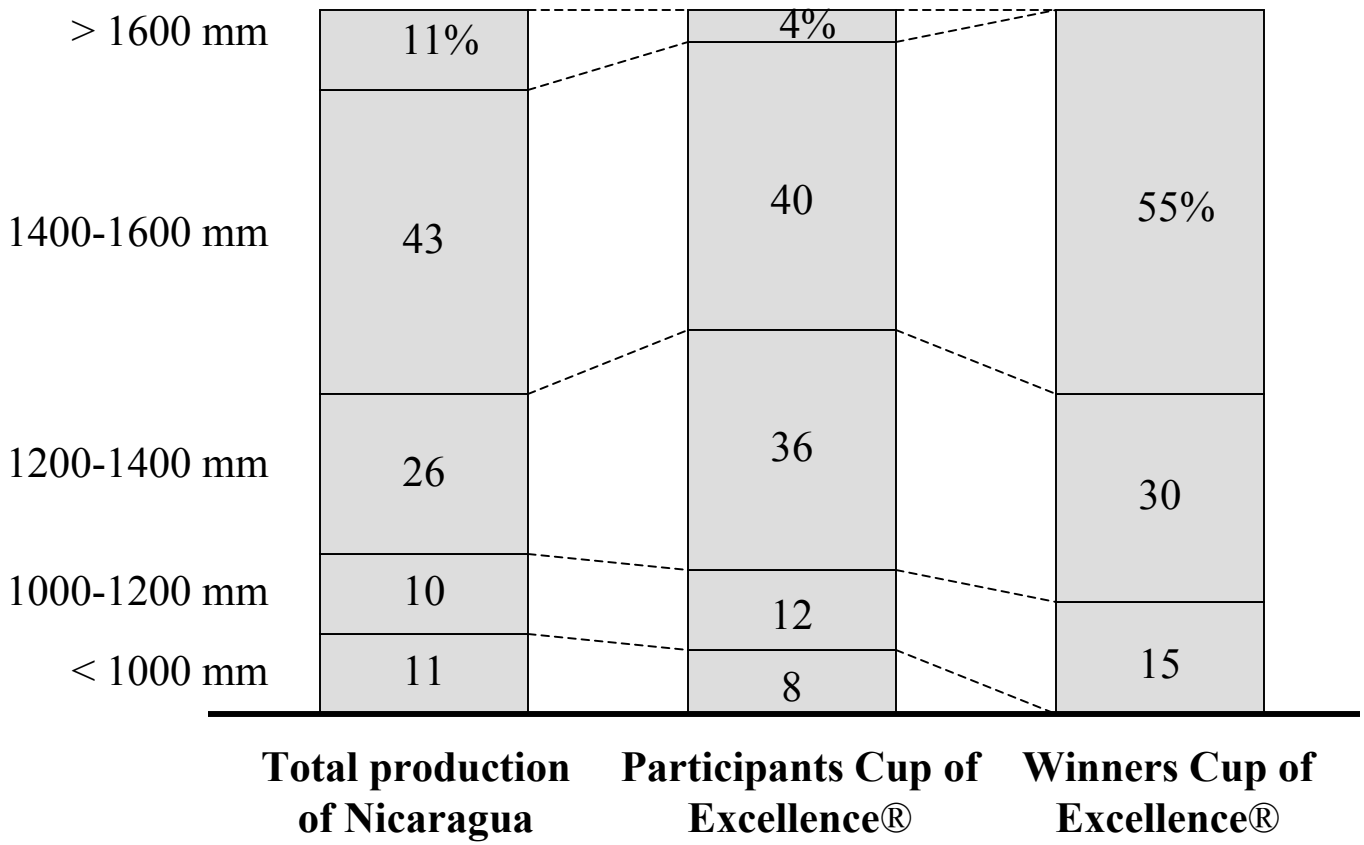
The winning farms have an altitude of over 1000 meters ...



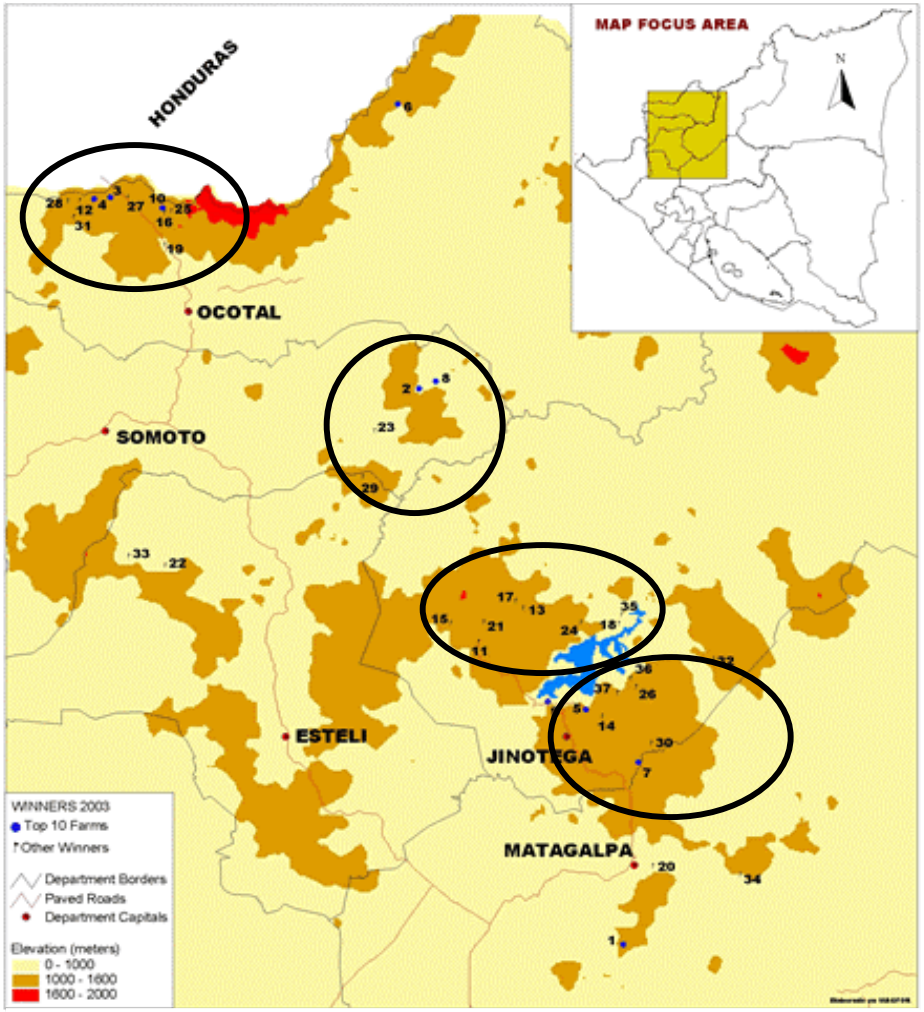
Source: UNICAFE; TechnoServe

... and receive 1000-1600 mm of rainfall per year



Source: UNICAFE; INETER; TechnoServe

Most of the winners can be grouped into four zones



Source: MAGFOR; TechnoServe

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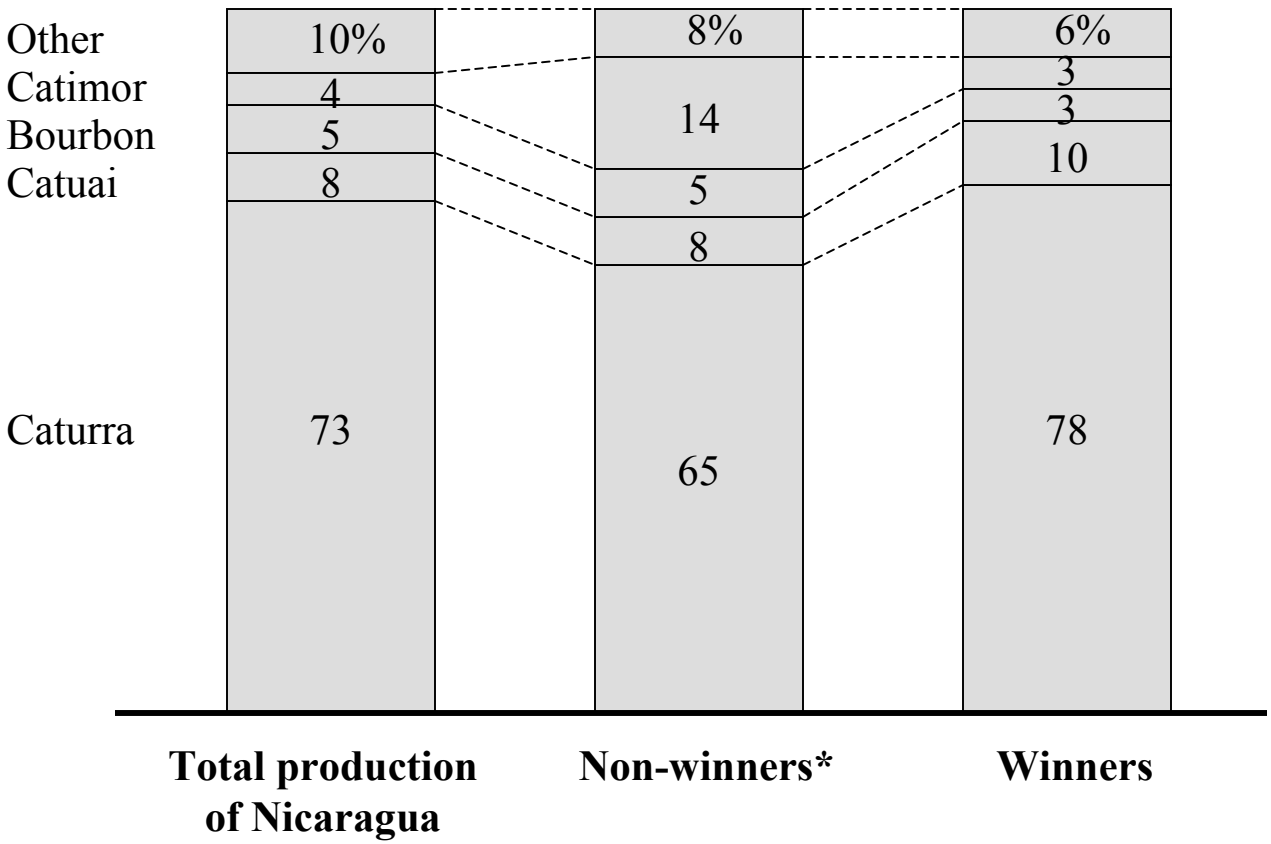
Caturra is the most popular variety among the winners



* From this point onwards, "non-winners" refers to a sample of participants with the same agro-climatic conditions as the winners

Source: UNICAFE; TechnoServe

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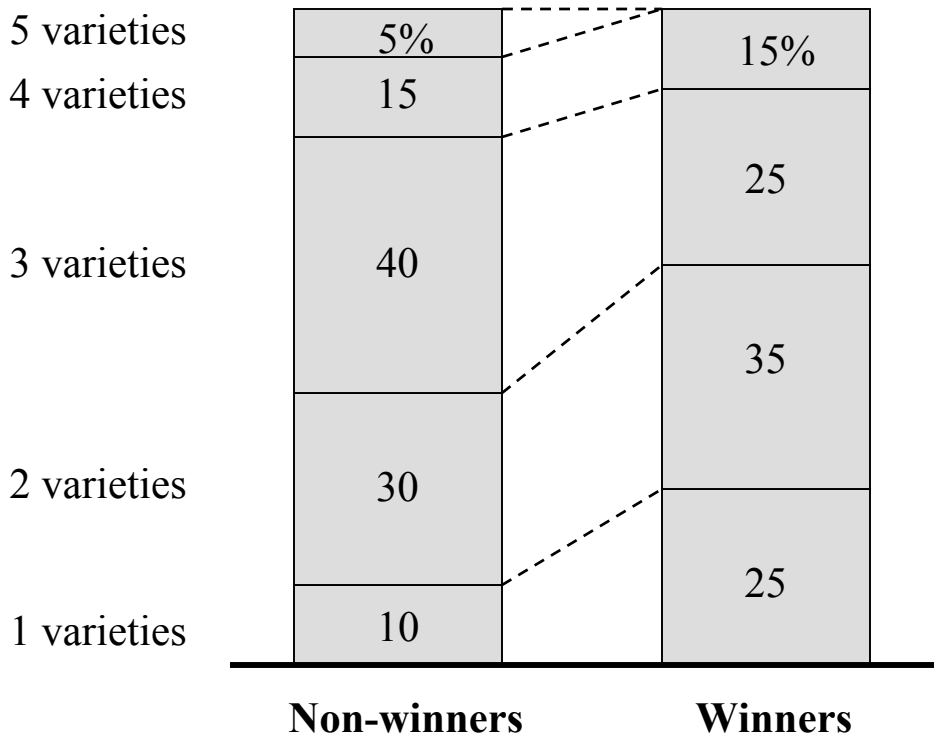
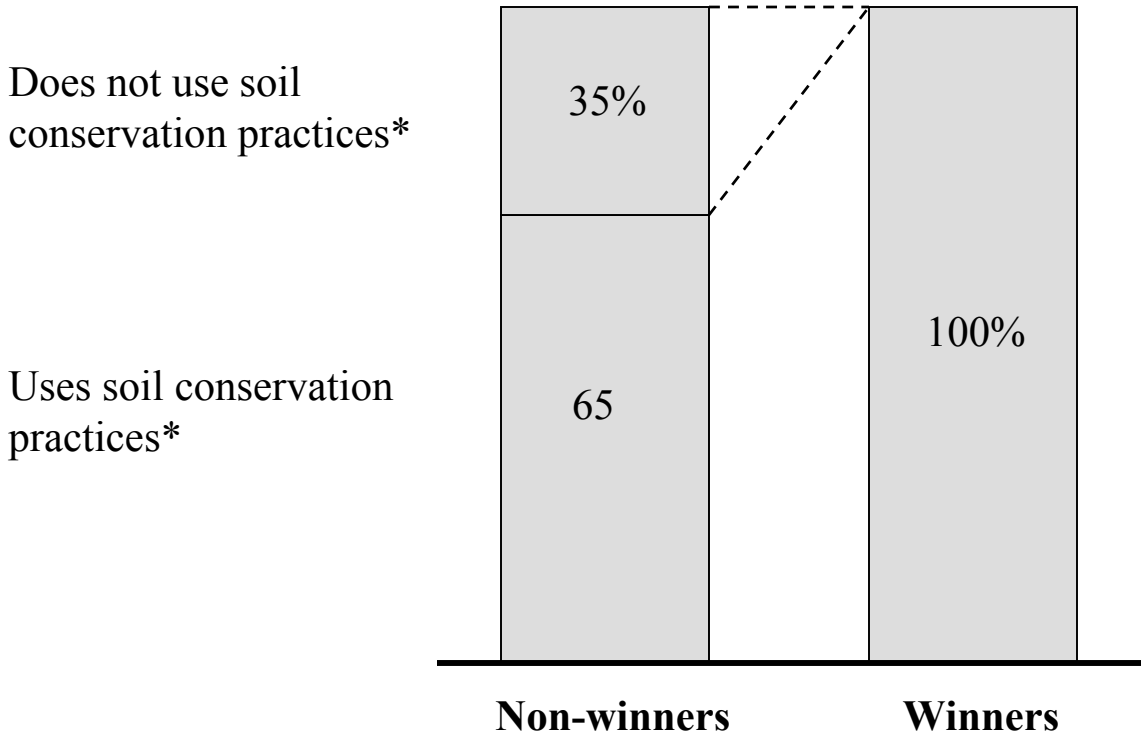
The winners focus their efforts on growing only a few varieties of coffee

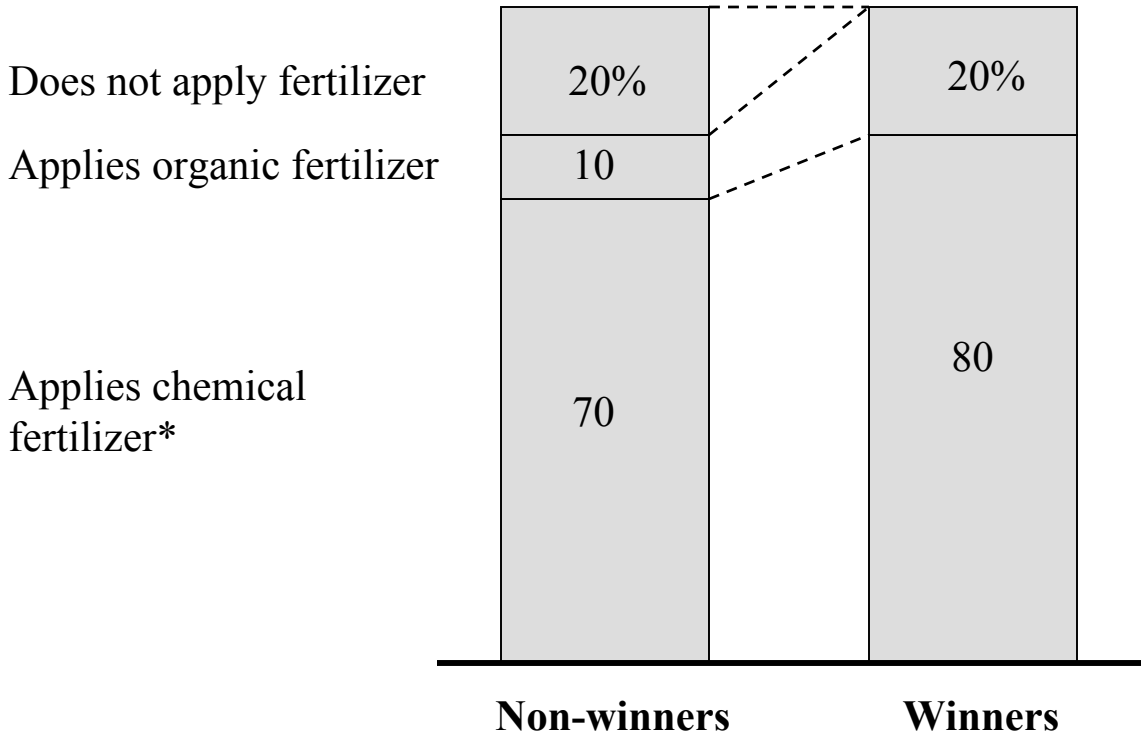


All of the winners use soil conservation practices ...



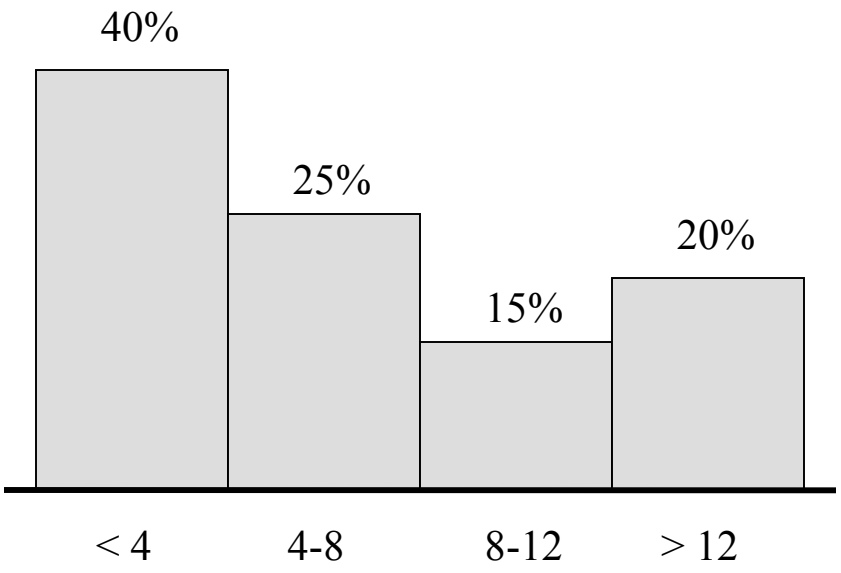
* Examples: Planting of rows of coffee trees at a single height, cultivation of wind barriers, and use of water drainage channels

... and apply fertilizer to their coffee plants



* Typically, producers apply a formula of urea and other chemicals

Many of the winners, however, apply less than 4 ounces of fertilizer per plant per year



Application of fertilizer (ounces) per year

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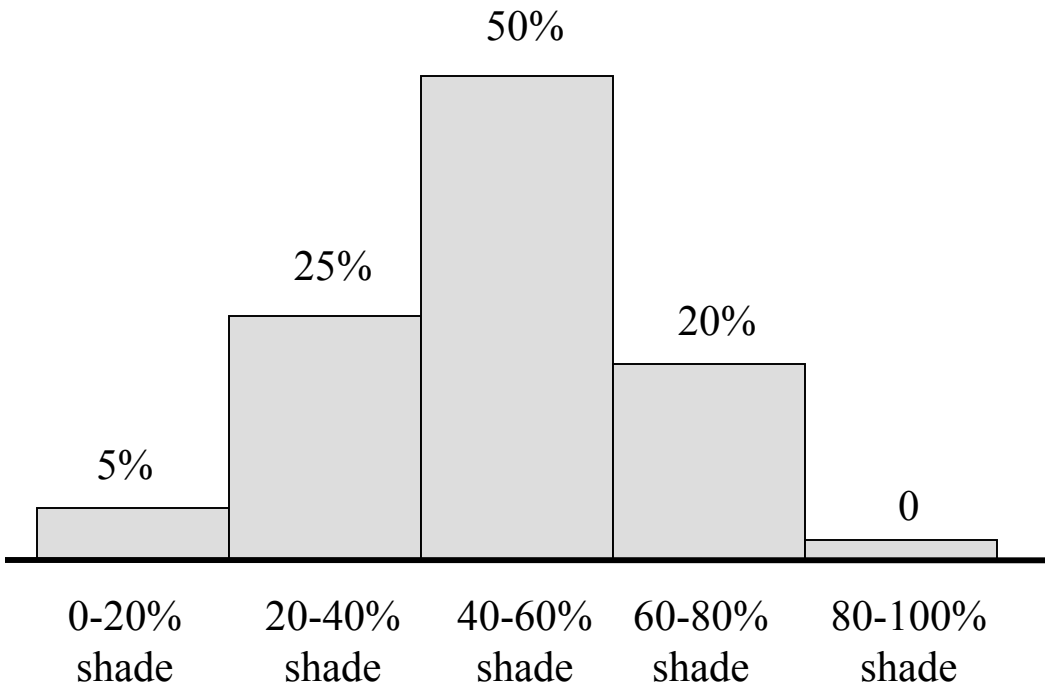
Almost all of the winners grow their coffee under shade



Percentage of shade cover on the coffee farm

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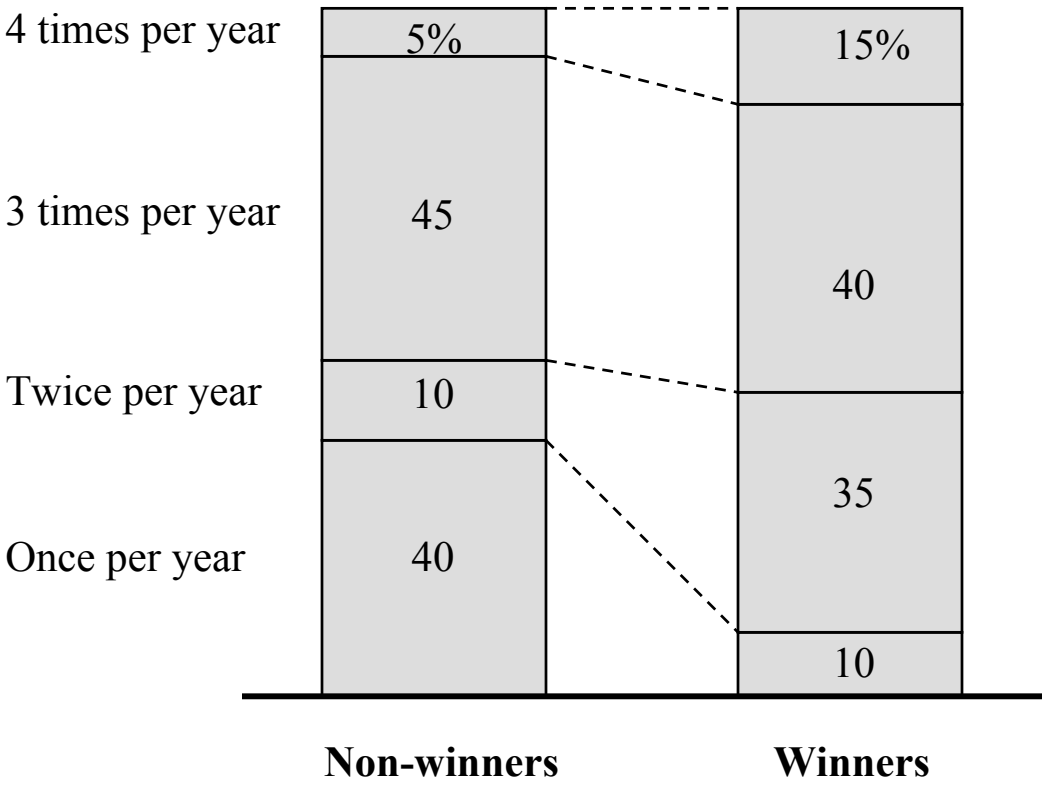
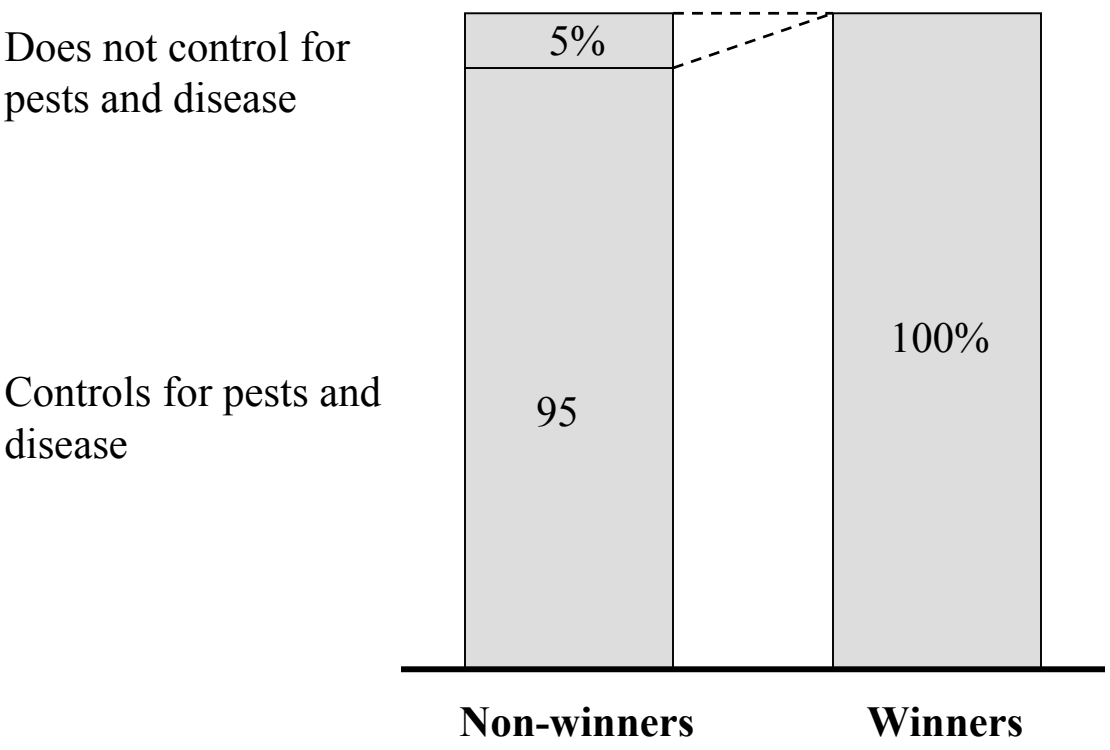
The winners employ weed control at least twice per year



The winners as well as the non-winners control regularly for pests and disease



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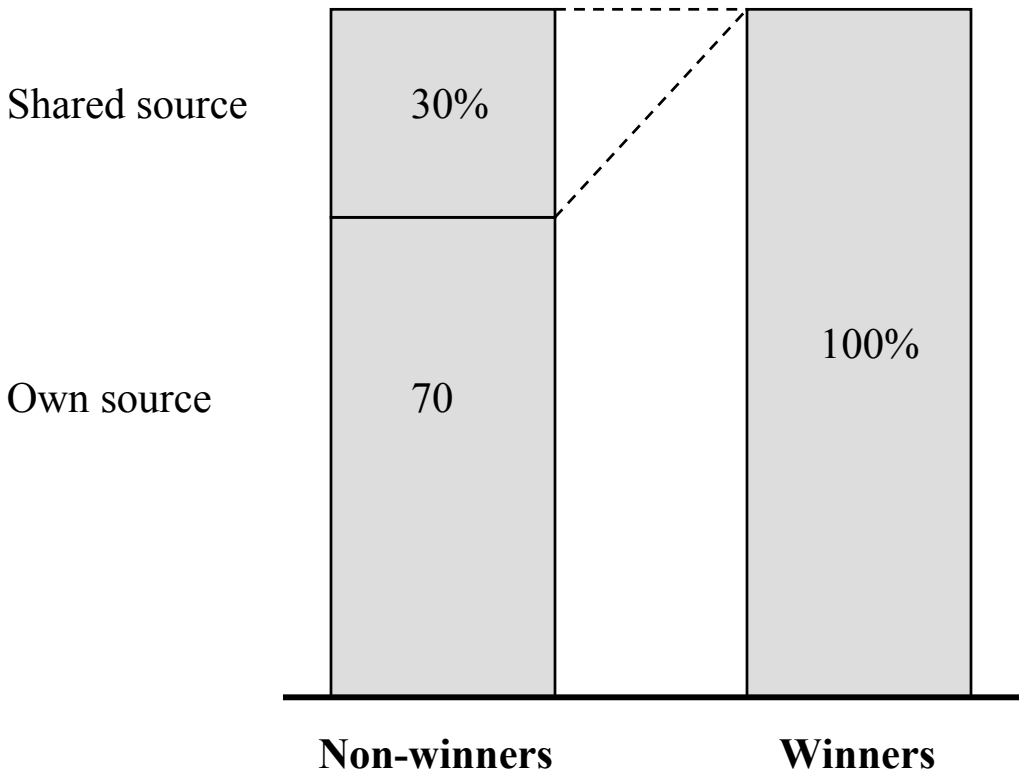
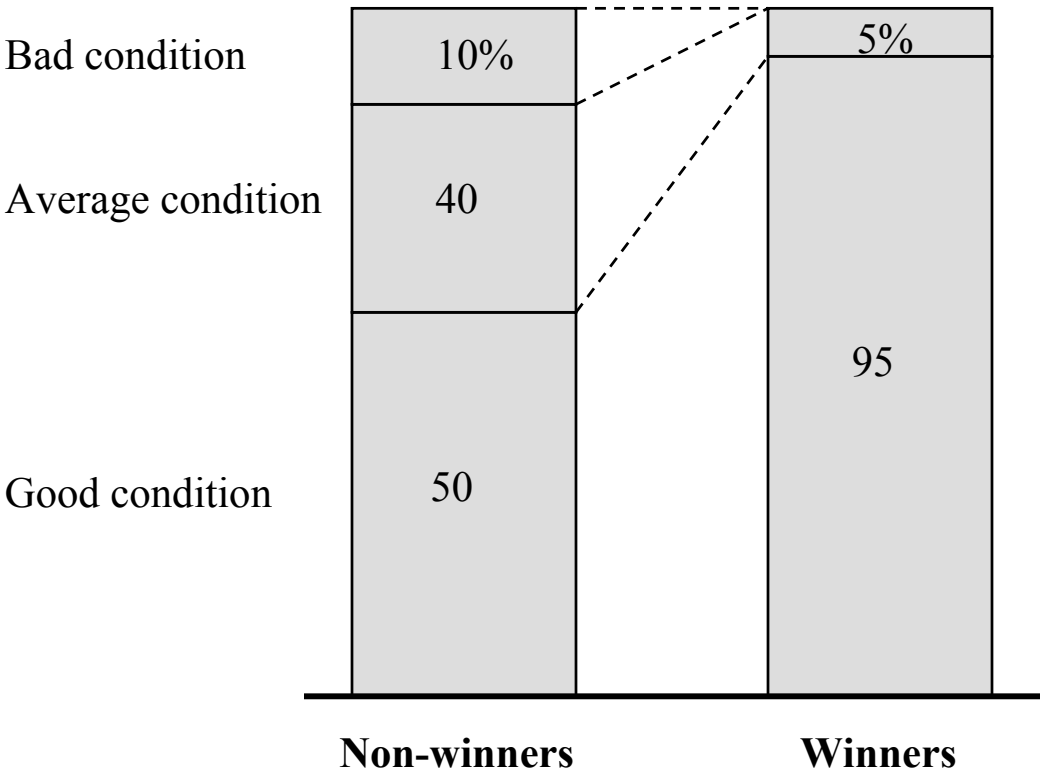
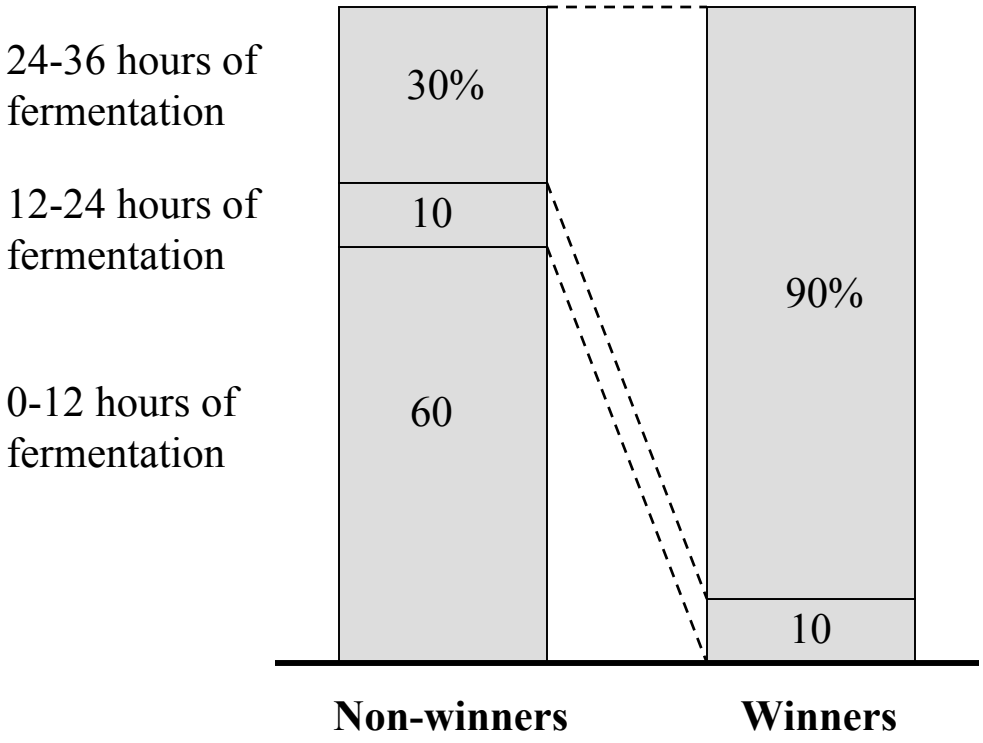
The winners have access to their own source of clean water ...



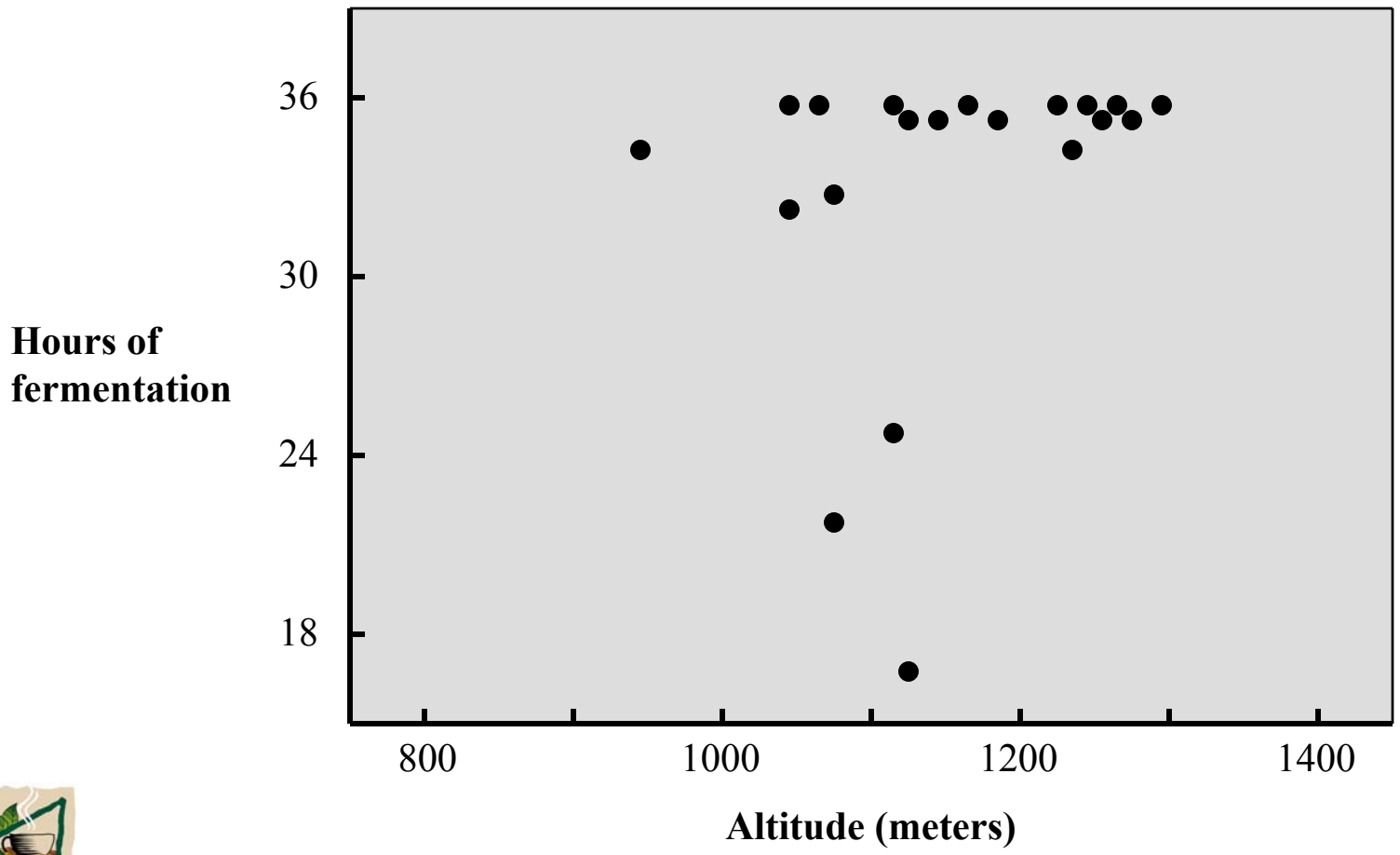
... and their depulping machines are in good condition



The winners ferment their coffee 24 to 36 hours -- much longer than the non-winners



Among the winners, there is not a clear relationship between hours of fermentation and altitude



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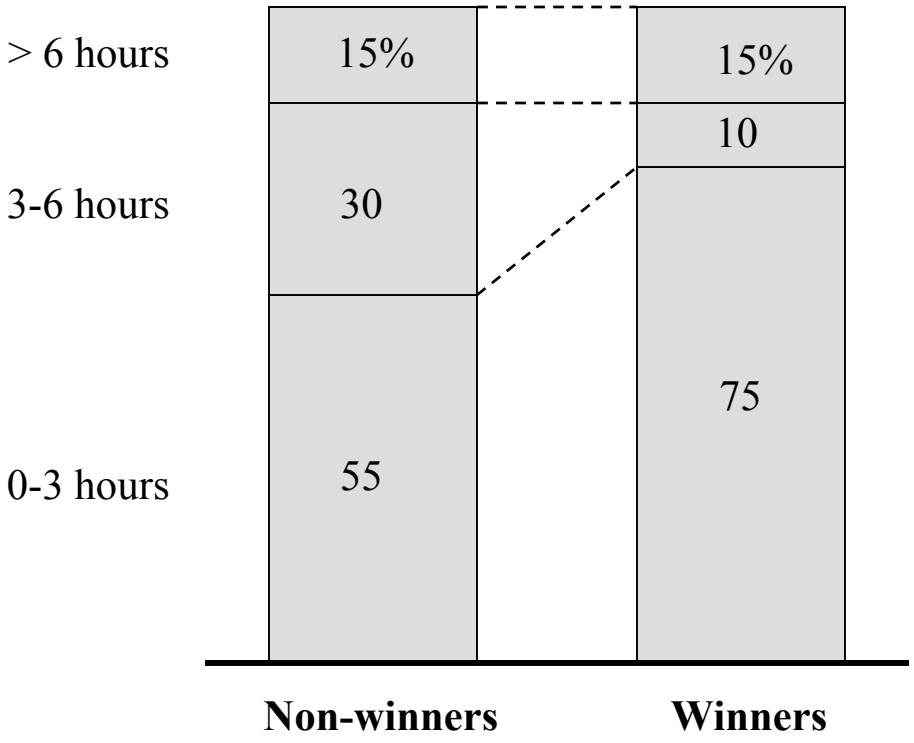
The coffee of the winners spends little time between washing and arrival at the dry processing mill



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CONLUSIONS

- The study confirms that altitude has an important impact on quality. In principle, a coffee farm needs an **altitude of at least 1000 meters** in order to produce a coffee of excellent quality
- The study also shows that **good agricultural production practices** can contribute to quality
- In addition, the study confirms the importance of having access to a source of **clean water** and having a **de-pulping machine in good condition**
- And, finally, to produce a coffee of excellent quality, the study suggests that the coffee must be allowed to ferment for a sufficiently long time. Almost all of the winners of the Cup of Excellence® **fermented their coffee for more than 30 hours**

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